

## VIII.

### GEORGE ROSS, THE SCOTCH AGENT.

#### CHAPTER I.

Men resemble the gods in nothing so much as in doing good to their fellow-creatures. — CICERO.

IN the letter in which Junius accuses the Duke of Grafton of having sold a patent-place in the collection of customs to one Mr. Hine, he informs the reader that the person employed by his grace in negotiating the business “was George Ross, the Scotch Agent, and worthy confidant of Lord Mansfield. And no sale by the candle,” he adds, “was ever conducted with greater formality.” Now, slight as this notice is, there is something in it sufficiently tangible for the imagination to lay hold of. If the reader thinks of the Scotch Agent at all, he probably thinks of him as one of those convenient creatures so necessary to the practical statesman, whose merit does not consist more in their being ingenious in a great degree, than in their being honest in a very small one. So mixed a thing is poor human nature, however, that, though the statement of Junius has never yet been fairly controverted, no possible estimate of character could be more unjust. The Scotch

Agent, whatever the nature of his services to the Duke of Grafton, was in reality a high-minded, and, what is more, a truly patriotic man; so good a person, indeed, that, in a period of political heats and animosities, his story, fairly told, might teach us a lesson of charity and moderation. I wish I could transport the reader to where his portrait hangs, side by side with that of his friend the Lord Chief Justice, in the drawing-room of Cromarty House. The air of dignified benevolence impressed on the features of the handsome old man, with his gray hair curling round his temples, would secure a fair hearing for him from even the sturdiest of the class who hate their neighbors for the good of their country. Besides, the very presence of the noble-looking lawyer, so much more like the Murray eulogized by Pope and Lyttleton than the Mansfield denounced by Junius, would of itself serve as a sort of guarantee for the honor of his friend.

George Ross was the son of a petty proprietor of Easter-Ross, and succeeded, on the death of his father, to the few barren acres on which, for a century or two before, the family had been ingenious enough to live. But he possessed, besides, what was more valuable than twenty such patrimonies, an untiring energy of disposition, based on a substratum of the soundest good sense; and, what was scarcely less important than either, ambition enough to turn his capacity of employment to the best account. Ross-shire a century ago was no place for such a man; and as the only road to preferment at this period was the road that led south, George Ross, when very young, left his mother's cottage for England, where he spent nearly fifty years amongst statesmen and courtiers, and in the enjoyment of the friendship of such men as President Forbes and Lord Mansfield. At length he returned, when an old,

gray-headed man, to rank among the greatest capitalists and proprietors of the county, and purchased, with other lesser properties in the neighborhood, the whole estate of Cromarty. Perhaps he had come to rest him ere he died. But there seems to be no such thing as changing one's natural bent, when confirmed by the habits of half a lifetime; and the energies of the Scotch Agent, now that they had gained him fortune and influence, were as little disposed to fall asleep as they had been forty years before. As it was no longer necessary, however, that they should be employed on his own account, he gave them full scope in behalf of his poorer neighbors. The country around him lay dead. There were no manufactories, no trade, no knowledge of agriculture, no consciousness that matters were ill, and, consequently, no desire of making them better; and the herculean task imposed upon himself by the Scotch Agent, now considerably turned of sixty, was to animate and revolutionize the whole. And such was his statesman-like sagacity in developing the hitherto undiscovered resources of the country, joined to a high-minded zeal that could sow liberally in the hope of a late harvest for others to reap, that he fully succeeded.

He first established in the town an extensive manufactory of hempen cloth, which has ever since employed about two hundred persons within its walls, and fully twice that number without. He next built an ale brewery, which, at the time of its erection, was by far the largest in the north of Scotland. He then furnished the town, at a great expense, with an excellent harbor, and set on foot a trade in pork which for the last thirty years has been carried on by the people of the place to an extent of from about fifteen to twenty thousand pounds annually. He set himself, too, to initiate his tenantry in the art of rearing wheat;

and finding them wofully unwilling to become wiser on the subject, he tried the force of example, by taking an extensive farm under his own management and conducting it on the most approved principles of modern agriculture. He established a nail and spade manufactory; brought women from England to instruct the young girls in the art of working lace; provided houses for the poor; presented the town with a neat, substantial building, the upper part of which serves for a council-room and the lower as a prison; and built for the accommodation of the poor Highlanders, who came thronging into the town to work on his land and in his manufactories, a handsome Gaelic chapel. He built for his own residence an elegant house of hewn stone; surrounded it with pleasure-grounds, designed in the best style of the art; planted many hundred acres of the less improvable parts of his property; and laid open the hitherto scarcely accessible beauties of the hill of Cromarty by crossing and re-crossing it with well-nigh as many walks as there are veins in the human body. He was proud of his exquisite landscapes, and of his own skill in heightening their beauty, and fully determined, he said, if he but lived long enough, to make Cromarty worth an Englishman's while coming all the way from London to see it.

When Osear fell asleep, says the old Irish bard, it was impossible to awaken him before his time except by cutting off one of his fingers or flinging a rock at his head; and woe to the poor man who disturbed him! The Agent found it every whit as difficult to awaken a sleeping country, and in some respects almost as unsafe. I am afraid human nature is nearly the same thing in the people that it is in their rulers, and that both are alike disposed to prefer the man who flatters them to the man who merely

does them good. George Ross was by no means the most popular of proprietors. He disturbed old prejudices, and unfixed old habits. The farmers thought it hard that they should have to break up their irregular map-like patches of land, divided from each other by little strips and corners not yet reclaimed from the waste, into awkward-looking rectangular fields, and that they durst no longer fasten their horses to the plough by the tail, — a piece of natural harness evidently formed for the express purpose. The townspeople deemed the hempen manufactory unwholesome; and found that the English lace-women, who to a certainty were tea-drinkers, and even not very hostile, it was said, to gin, were in a fair way of teaching their pupils something more than the mere weaving of lace. What could be more heathenish, too, than the little temple covered with cockle-shell which the laird had just reared on a solitary corner of the hill, but which they soon sent spinning over the cliff into the sea, a downward journey of a hundred yards? And then his odious pork trade! There was no prevailing on the people to rear pigs for him; and so he had to build a range of offices, in an out-of-the-way nook of his lands, which he stocked with hordes of these animals, that he might rear them for himself. The herds increased in size and number, and, voracious beyond calculation, almost occasioned a famine. Even the great wealth of the speculatist proved insufficient to supply them with food, and the very keepers were in danger of being eaten alive. The poor animals seemed departing from their very nature; for they became long and lank, and bony as the griffins of heraldry, until they looked more like race-horses than pigs; and as they descended with every ebb in huge droves to browse on the sea-weed, or delve for shell-fish among the pebbles, there was no lack

of music befitting their condition when the large rock-crab revenged with his nippers on their lips the injuries inflicted on him with their teeth. Now, all this formed a fine subject for joking to people who indulged in a half-Jewish dislike of the pig, and who could not guess that the pork trade was one day to pay the rents of half the widows' cottages in the country. But no one could lie more open than George Ross to that species of ridicule which the men who see further than their neighbors, and look more to the advantage of others than to their own, cannot fail to encounter. He was a worker in the dark, and at no slight expense; for, though all his many projects were ultimately found to be benefits conferred on his country, not one of them proved remunerative to himself. But he seems to have known mankind too well to have expected a great deal from their gratitude, though on one occasion at least his patience gave way.

The town in the course of years had so entirely marched to the west, that the town's cross came at length to be fairly left behind, with a hawthorn hedge on the one side and a garden fence on the other; and when the Agent had completed the house which was to serve as council-room and prison to the place, the cross was taken down from its stand of more than two centuries, and placed in front of the new building. That people might the better remember the circumstance, there was a showy procession got up; healths were drunk beside the cross in the Agent's best wine, and not a little of his best crystal broken against it; and the evening terminated in a ball. It so happened, however, through some cross chance, that, though all the gentility of the place were to be invited, three young men, who deemed themselves quite as genteel as the best of their neighbors, were passed over. The dignified manager

of the hemp manufactory had received no invitation, nor the clever superintendent of the nail-work, nor yet the spruce clerk of the brewery; and as they were all men of spirit, it so happened that during the very next night the cross was taken down from its new pedestal, broken into three pieces, and carried still further to the west, to an open space where four lanes met; and there it was found in the morning, the pieces piled over each other, and surrounded by a profusion of broken ale bottles. The Agent was amazingly angry, — angrier, indeed, than his acquaintance had deemed him capable of becoming; and in the course of the day the town's crier went through the streets proclaiming a reward of ten pounds in hand, and a free room in Mr. Ross's new buildings for life, to any one who would give such information as might lead to the conviction of the offenders.

In one of his walks a few days after, the Agent met with a poor, miserable-looking Highland woman, who had been picking a few withered sticks out of one of his hedges, and whose hands and clothes seemed torn by the thorns. "Poor old creature," he said, as she dropped her courtesy in passing, "you must go to my manager, and tell him I have ordered you a barrel of coals. And stay, — you are hungry: call at my house, in passing, and the servants will find you something to bring home with you." The poor woman blessed him, and looked up hesitatingly in his face. She had never betrayed any one, she said; but his honor was so good a gentleman, — so very good a gentleman; and so she thought she had best tell him all she knew about the breaking of the cross. She lived in a little garret over the room of Jamie Banks, the nailer; and having slept scarcely any all the night in which the cross was taken down, — for the weather was bitterly cold, and her

bed-clothes very thin, — she could hear weighty footsteps traversing the streets till near morning, when the house-door opened, and in came Jamie, with a tottering, unequal step, and disturbed the whole family by stumbling over a stool into his wife's washing-tub. Besides, she had next day overheard his wife rating him for staying out to so *untimely* an hour, and his remark, in reply, that she would do well to keep quiet, unless she wished to see him hanged. This was the sort of clue the affair required; and, in following it up, the unlucky nailer was apprehended and examined; but it was found that, through a singular lapse of memory, he had forgotten every circumstance connected with the night in question, except that he had been in the very best company, and one of the happiest men in the world.

Jamie Banks was decidedly the most eccentric man of his day, in at least one parish, — full of small wit and small roguery, and famous for a faculty of invention fertile enough to have served a poet. On one occasion, when the gill of whiskey had risen to three halfpence in Cromarty, and could still be bought for a penny in Avoch, he had prevailed on a party of his acquaintance to accompany him to the latter place, that they might drink themselves rich on the strength of the old proverb; and as they actually effected a saving of two shillings in spending six, it was clear, he said, that, had not their money failed them, they would have made fortunes apiece. Alas for the littleness of that great passion, the love of fame! I have observed that the tradespeople among whom one meets with most instances of eccentricity, are those whose shops, being places of general resort, furnish them with space enough on which to achieve a humble notoriety, by rendering themselves unlike everybody else. To secure to Jamie



Banks due leisure for recollection, he was committed to jail.

He was sitting one evening beside the prison fire, with one of his neighbors and the jailer, and had risen to exclude the chill night air by drawing a curtain over the open-barred window of the apartment, when a man suddenly started from behind the wall outside, and discharged a large stone with tremendous force at his head. The missile almost brushed his ear as it sung past, and, rebounding from the opposite wall, rolled along the floor. "That maun be Rob Williamson," exclaimed Jamie, "wanting to keep me quiet. Out, neebor Jonathan, an' after him." Neebor Jonathan, an active young fellow, sprung to the door, caught the sounds of retreating footsteps as he turned the gate, and, dashing after like a greyhound, succeeded in laying hold of the coat-skirts of Rob Williamson, as he strained onwards through the gate of the hemp manufactory. He was immediately secured, and lodged in another apartment of the prison; and in the morning Jamie Banks was found to have recovered his memory.

He had finished working, he said, on the evening after the ball, and was just putting on his coat preparatory to leaving the shop, when the superintendent called him into his writing-room, where he found three persons sitting at a table half covered with bottles. Rob Williamson, the weaver, was one of these; the other two were the clerk of the brewery and the manager of the hemp manufactory; and they were all arguing together on some point of divinity. The manager cleared a seat for him beside himself, and filled his glass thrice in succession, by way of making up for the time he had lost. Nothing could be more untrue than that the manager was proud. They then all began to speak about morals and Mr. Ross. The clerk was

certain that, with his harbor, and his piggery, and his heathen temples, and his lace-women, he would not leave a ray of morality in the place; and Rob was quite as sure he was no friend to the gospel. He a builder of Gaelic kirks, forsooth! Had he not yesterday put up a popish dagon of a cross, and made the silly mason bodies worship it for the sake o' a dram? And then, how common ale-drinking had become in the place!—in his young days they drank nothing but gin,—and what would their grandfathers have said to a *whigmaleerie* o' a ball! “I sipped and listened,” continued Jamie, “and thought that the time could not have been better spent at an elders' meeting in the kirk; and as the night wore later the conversation became still more edifying, until at length all the bottles were emptied, when we sallied out in a body, to imitate the old Reformers by breaking the cross. ‘We may suffer, Jamie, for what we have done,’ said Rob to me as we parted for the night; ‘but, remember, it was duty, Jamie, it was duty; we have been testifying wi' our hands, an' when the hour o' trial comes we mauna be slow in testifying wi' our tongues too.’ He wasna slack, the deceitfu' body!” concluded Jamie, “in trying to stop mine.” And thus closed the evidence. The Agent was no vindictive man. He dismissed his two managers and the clerk, to find for themselves a more indulgent master; but the services of Jamie Banks he still retained; and the first employment which he found for him after his release was the fashioning of four iron bars for the repair of the cross.

The Agent, in the closing scene of his life, was destined to experience the unhappiness of blighted hope. He had an only son, a weak and very obstinate young man, who, without intellect enough to appreciate his well-calculated schemes, and yet conceit enough to sit in judgment on

them, was ever showing his spirit by opposing a sort of selfish nonsense, that aped the semblance of common sense, to the expansive and benevolent philosophy of his father. But the old man bore patiently with his conceit and folly. Like the great bulk of the class who attain to wealth and influence through their own exertions, he was anxiously ambitious to live in his posterity, and be the founder of a family; and he knew it was quite as much according to the nature of things that a fool might be the father, as that he should be the son, of a wise man. He secured, therefore, his lands to his posterity by the law of entail; did all that education and example could do for the young man; and succeeded in getting him married to a sweet, amiable English woman, the daughter of a bishop. But, alas! his precautions, and the hopes in which he indulged, proved equally vain. The young man, only a few months after his marriage, was piqued, when at table, by some remark of his father regarding his mode of carving,—some slight allusion, it is said, to the maxim that little men cannot afford to neglect little matters,—and rising, with much apparent coolness, from beside his wife, he stepped into an adjoining room, and there blew out his brains with a pistol. The stain of his blood may still be seen in two large brownish-colored blotches on the floor.

George Ross survived his son for several years; and he continued, though a sadder and a graver man, to busy himself with all his various speculations as before. It was observed, however, that he seemed to care less than formerly for whatever was exclusively his own, for his fine house and his beautiful lands, and that he chiefly employed himself in maturing his several projects for the good of his country-folks. Time at length began to set its seal on his labors, by discovering their value; though not until death

had first affixed *his* to the character of the wise and benevolent projector. He died full of years and honor, mourned by the poor, and regretted by every one; and even those who had opposed his innovations with the warmest zeal were content to remember him, with all the others, as "the good laird."